

# The Truth About The John Birch Society

By Elizabeth Worley • Illustration By Jerome Tarpley

It's difficult to remain neutral when dealing with the John Birch Society — you're either for it or against it, say Birchers who've been burned by what they see as Communist-controlled media. Here's a refreshingly objective account.





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The door of the sprawling brick home in North Atlanta is opened by a smiling, gray-haired man in a tweed sportcoat. "Hi there." He grasps me firmly by the hand and draws me inside. "Welcome," he grins, "to the Inner Sanctum of the John Birch Society!"

"Yeah!" echoes a dark-suited businessman who also shakes my hand in a no-nonsense manner. "This is one of our secret meetings!" Laughter ripples through the group of men and women who fill the room.

The meeting is held downstairs in the pine-paneled recreation room. Most of

the members sit around the oversized Ping Pong table dominating the space; the rest sit around several wobbly card tables. A stocky and balding, mid-thirtyish man in a tailored gray suit strides purposefully to the front of the room. His energetic walk and disciplined manner suggest military training. I assume he is the leader; he is program chairman for the evening. He turns to face an American flag; the members stand as one body.

"Now," (he glances in my direction), "we'll begin this meeting of the John Birch Society the way we begin all meetings — with the Pledge of Allegiance."

With appropriate solemnity, he places his right hand over his heart, and from around the room voices rise, rise in unison from the hearts of eight women and 15 men (one bearded, one black), from 18 to post-retirement — in all, 22 Birchers and one apolitical writer.

"The first order of business tonight," the chairman announces as we resume our seats, "will be a review of what, exactly, our Information in Action program is all about. The purpose is just as the name suggests: Information plus Action. The information comes from news articles, film strips and the *Birch Bulletin*. The action is the letters we write to our Congressmen and Senators. Information plus Action equals *Impact!* And that's what we're trying to do — impact our Representatives!"

He consults a sheaf of written notes on the Ping Pong table in front of him. "The two pieces of legislation we'll deal with tonight are a proposal to abolish the Environmental Protection Agency and a bill to balance the Federal budget by 1981."

The men and women around the room are attentive. A few take notes; most just listen.

"Our opposition to the EPA is based on the following four points." His voice is authoritative; he stands in a military at-rest posture, his hands clasped behind his back. "First, environmental issues should be handled at the State level — not by the Federal government. Second, the EPA was set up by Presidential fiat — by-passing Congress — and Executive Order is not Constitutional. Third, the EPA is the fastest-growing bureaucracy in the Federal government — and the most expensive. Fourth, the EPA hurts business with its multitude of rules and regulations. Businesses then pass on the cost of compliance to the consumer. Let me just add, for the benefit of our guest," he speaks directly to me, "that the Birch Society is not against cleaning up and protecting the environment. But the states can do it better — and cheaper — than the Federal government."

A murmur of agreement moves through the room. A ruddy-faced man in a forest green polyester leisure suit calls out good-naturedly, "Let's get on with it — we need less talk and more action!"

"Okay." Our leader grins self-consciously and nods, "Okay. The second piece of legislation is Senate Joint Resolution Number Five. This calls for a balanced budget by reducing government spending — cutting back the size of government and cutting taxes. We don't need a Constitutional amendment to balance the budget. Congress can cut dozens of wasteful programs — like OSHA, FEA and EPA — and pass on immediate tax cuts."

Paper, pens and envelopes are passed around the room. A list of the House Committee members involved with these two items, with their addresses and their voting records, is also circulated; then the 22 Society members proceed to write letters to their Congressmen.

A genial older man, twinkling from behind thick glasses asks me, "Exciting enough for you? You want to write some letters?"

The chapter leader, Jack Harper, looks like a model for an expensive Scotch ad — tall, tanned and neatly black-bearded. "You know," he leans over and tells me, "the only reason we need the INA meetings is so we can make a concerted effort in a particular direction. If every individual would do the things they *should* do as American citizens — writing their Congressmen, voting in all elections and in general just keeping their eye on what the government is doing — then we wouldn't need this. But most Americans don't involve themselves in government. So it's almost like we're a lobby — a lobby for less government, more individual responsibility and preserving the Constitution."

I eat a number of homemade chocolate chip cookies, drink some too-sweet iced tea and leave the meeting puzzled. Where are all the wild-eyed, rhetoric-spouting, gun-polishing fanatics I'd heard about? Where are the little old ladies who check under the beds each night for communist spies? Where, in fact, are the hysterical and paranoid conspiracy freaks generally associated with the Birch Society?

The American Opinion Bookstores are a national chain, owned and operated by local Birchers as outlets for the numerous books, magazines, pamphlets, tapes and films the Society publishes. The Atlanta store is located at 3224 Peachtree Rd. (above a paint store and down the hall from a beauty shop).

Inside, in one corner, stands an American flag, unfurled. Everywhere are rain-





bow-colored bumper stickers proclaiming: *Freedom Wasn't Won With a Registered Gun!* and *ERA Is Not The Way!* and *Stop Inflation — Slash Government Spending!* and *Taxpayers — The Oppressed Majority!* On one wall hangs the solemn visage of George Washington, staring across the room at a faded portrait of a handsome World War II soldier — Captain John Birch.

John Birch grew up on a farm in Chattooga County, Georgia, graduated *magna cum laude* from Mercer University in Macon and went on to become a Baptist missionary. At the outbreak of World War II, Birch, then in his early 20s, was teaching and preaching in Hangchow, China. Because of his familiarity with the country's terrain and his ability to speak fluent Chinese, Birch was assigned to work in intelligence under Gen. Claire Chennault, Commander of the American Volunteer Group. Birch's military record is one of outstanding distinction. In late August, 1945, nine days after the surrender of the Japanese, Captain Birch volunteered to lead a special intelligence mission for the U.S. Army. While on this mission, Birch and his party ran into and were detained by a group of Red Chinese guerrillas. While the events which followed are cloudy, the result was that John Birch was shot and killed.

Robert Welch, retired executive of a Massachusetts candy company, founded the Birch Society in 1958. Welch established the Society as an educational organization, supplying — through books, tapes, films and traveling speakers — information about and inspiration in what he believes to be "freedom's last stand" against the multifold tyrannies of international Communism. Welch has called John Birch the first victim of World War III, "a worldwide battle, the first in history, between light and darkness, between freedom and slavery, between the spirit of Christianity and the spirit of anti-Christ in the souls and bodies of men." Birch was selected as the Society's symbol because he was, in Welch's eyes, the embodiment of all the right American ideals: a fusion of rural virtues, fundamentalist faith and unflinching patriotism.

When you start Birchers talking about Welch, you quickly get a picture of a stalwart amalgamation of Gen. George Washington, Paul Revere and David vs. Goliath all rolled into one morally upright, live-free-or-die New Englander. Birchers share Welch's belief that the world order envisioned and espoused some 200 years ago by our Founding Fathers is today perilously close to extinction — threatened internally by the forces of socialization and externally by the rapid rise to power of communistic governments around the world. Welch's is a "voice crying in the wilderness" and every Bircher — man, woman and child

— pays heed.

Who are the men and women now following this self-styled 20th Century patriarch of patriotism?

Henry Sherman, full-time salaried coordinator for the Society and manager of the American Opinion Bookstore, declined to be interviewed, explaining he is "not allowed" to talk to members of the press. The only two people on the East Coast permitted to speak for the Society to the press are U.S. Representative Larry McDonald of Marietta and Jack McManus, Society Public Relations Director in Belmont, Massachusetts. When I question Henry about this rule, he says it is because in the past the Society has been repeatedly slandered by liberal "yellow journalists."

Birchers feel that, historically, they have been treated unfairly — even viciously — by the press. They believe the press has deliberately set out to discredit them by means of innuendo and slanted reporting. Why? Because, as they see it, the news media is controlled by an international conspiracy determined to destroy the Constitutional government of the United States — the very thing Birchers are committed body and soul to preserving.

"You cannot be neutral and objective when dealing with the Society," says one vehement lady. "You're either for it or against it. Because we're opposed to the liberal welfare state and because we're opposed to the Communists who are in control of the media, we've been made the enemy. I guarantee with my life that you will not be allowed to print the truth about the John Birch Society."

Larry McDonald's office in Marietta promises an interview on some undetermined date, but after three weeks of unreturned calls and vague assurances, McDonald's secretary finally says, "The Congressman is not interested in the interview. The Birch Society has been drug through the mud too many times in the past by the Atlanta press. He sees no point in going over it again."

When asked about who belongs, Jack McManus says: "The Society membership application does not request any demographic data, but independent studies have shown that we are roughly 40 per cent Catholic, 60 per cent Protestant/Christian Fundamentalist and one per cent Jewish. We are predominantly white, but there are black members." McManus says the national membership is somewhere between 60,000 to 100,000 and "the Birch Society is a beautiful cross-section of America. We have businessmen, doctors, lawyers, cab drivers, clergy, blue-collar workers, housewives and students." He laughs. "The only thing we're short on is millionaires!"

Chip Woods, WRNG Radio talk show host, has been a Society member for 19 years. For 11 of those, he served as writer, speaker and "in-house business

person" for the national staff in Belmont. Chip's tinted teardrop glasses, shaggy head of gray-streaked hair and ready grin hardly fit the stereotype of a national-level Bircher.

Asked how he became a Bircher, Chip says, "My family was living in Cuba when Castro took over. We got out in 1959. When we got back to this country a group had sprung up called the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. They were saying how wonderful Castro was and all the wonderful things he was doing for Cuba, and this just didn't fit with what I knew. I was not a conservative — if anything, I was a moderate socialist — but I had seen people arrested, I had seen people killed, I had seen property confiscated.

"I realized that a gangster with some special friends had just taken over Cuba and that people in our government were not only in favor of him but had protected his rise to power. I didn't have much doubt in my mind that Castro was a Communist, and I said as much in debates at the Fair Play meetings."

Chip continues: "I'd never heard of the Birch Society, and I'd never heard anyone trying to expose Castro as a Communist before he took power. But someone called me up and said, 'Boy, was I glad to hear you say Castro's a Communist. We've been saying that for two years!' He was a member of the Society, and Robert Welch had called Castro a Communist two years before he took over Cuba!"

"After that," explains Chip, "I started reading Birch material. I devoured everything I could get my hands on, and in about a year, I had a better education on my own — of history, economics and political science — than I would have gotten in 15 years of college. I felt I had been lied to, that a lot of information had been withheld from me, and I was angry. I became a crusader."

Chip laughs and gestures with his hands, palms up. "A lot of people will say to me, 'Chip, you're right,' but they're not going to do anything about it. They're not crusaders; I am. I made the decision to join the Society in 1961 when I was 20 years old, and I've been a member ever since."

In 1966 Welch coined the term "The Insiders" to refer to those powerful people in government, banking, private business and the press who, he believes, have as their goal the establishment of a one-world government — with themselves at the helm. Welch has said — at different times — that the Council on Foreign Relations, the Tri-Lateral Commission, the Rockefeller Foundations and the National Council of Churches are all breeding grounds for these "Insiders." Welch has also claimed the *Iluminati*, a super-secret occult society formed in Bavaria in 1776 by Freemason

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Adam Weishaupt, is at the root of the conspiracy. The *Illuminati's* goal was to abolish all traditional governments, religions and societal structures in the belief these would give way to a new world order which would transcend nationalism, sectionalism and all the other isms promoting conflict and dividing the human race.

"Karl Marx," says Chip, grinning, "said practically the same thing. He said that as we destroy all the traditional forms and the dictatorship of the proletariat is established, the State would then wither away. Did he really believe that? Or was this sugar-coated pablum being spoon-fed to the people to lead them astray?" Chip's grin fades and he becomes serious. "I think the idea of the State withering away was one Lenin knew wasn't true and Marx knew wasn't true. They wanted power, and the people today want power."

"We can look at what the *Illuminati* stood for," Chip continues, "and we can see the same patterns in operation today. Mr. Welch is satisfied that the conspirators today are descendants of the *Illuminati*. The historical evidence is there, but it's less than conclusive. I don't deny that there is a secret organization, and there may still be an *Illuminati*, but is it running the show today? I doubt it. I do believe, however, that within the Council on Foreign Relations, the Tri-lateralists and the other groups, there are some elitists working together — knowingly — to create the kind of world order they want. But is any one of those groups the Board of Directors?" Chip shrugs and shakes his head. "I don't think so. Is there a Board of Directors? Probably — somewhere."

Birchers believe in the conspiracy theory of history — that events and changes occur because somebody, somewhere, plans them (as contrasted with the theory that accident or evolution changes history).

"Take the issue of inflation," says Chip. "Everyone can agree that it's bad. Everyone can agree that it's got to be stopped and that the Federal government must take certain steps to stop it. A Bircher will go further, however," he emphasizes, "and say that inflation was planned, that it has been deliberately contrived by Keynesian economists. Lord Maynard Keynes, a British economist, actually wrote a plan for debauching a currency and spelled out exactly how to do it. I believe that his plan has been studied and is now being carried out. Most Birchers believe this. You might believe that we just happened to catch the inflation disease. I believe that somebody fed us the germs."

The 16th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1913, allows Congress to levy a graduated tax on personal incomes — despite the fact that during

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the 1890s, the income tax law was rescinded and declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Birchers are quick to point out that Karl Marx, in his *Communist Manifesto*, cited institution of a heavy graduated income tax as a necessary step in the erosion of a capitalistic society. They say the 16th Amendment was passed illegally, in secret, and is still unconstitutional today.

"The simplest way to tell if someone is free or not," Chip states, "is to ask: do they get to keep the fruits of their labors or do the fruits belong to someone else? Increasingly, today the fruits of our labors are the property of the State. They are taken by the State, and they are distributed by the State. Income taxes are now running at 33-45 per cent; that is, of every dollar earned in this country, the government takes 33-45 per cent of it. It used to be 30 per cent; before that, it was 20 per cent. Before that, it was 10 per cent. How far does it have to go," he asks grimly, "before you think you're being controlled?" He leans back in his chair and presses the tips of his fingers together. "I say I'm being controlled today, 35 per cent of the time."

A frequently recurring theme with Birchers is that of State's right vs. Federal control. The behemoth of Federal agencies and laws which attempt to regulate private business, ecological concerns and social issues are viewed by Birchers as direct violations of the Constitution. "If an issue hasn't been covered in the first nine amendments of the Bill of Rights," goes their refrain, "it should be dealt with by the states. The Federal government has no authority to interfere. The Tenth Amendment clearly spells this out."

During the Sixties, The Birch Society was loudly vocal in its opposition to passage of the Civil Rights Act, not because of any racial bias, they say, but because these were matters to be decided at the state and local levels — without Federal intervention. In their eyes, the entire Civil Rights movement was directed and controlled by the "Insiders" in order to erode the states' powers of determination, create more conflict between the races and promote civil strife. Martin Luther King Jr., Stokely Carmichael, and Ralph Abernathy, Malcolm X and all other civil rights activists — black and white — were considered puppets of the "Insiders," if not conscious Communist agents.

In a local restaurant, I have coffee with Charles Eberhart, who has been a member of the Society for three years. He says he was sympathetic to their beliefs for some time before he joined. The native Atlantan and insurance salesman is married to a school teacher and has three children, aged two to 14. Charles is a tall, heavy-set man with

closely cropped hair. He is black.

"Given the state of affairs that existed in the past with regards to civil rights," says Charles, "it was a natural for the Negro [he prefers the term "Negro" to today's more widely accepted "black"] to say, 'Hey, I've been at it too long. I've suffered enough. I want something now.' On the other side, the whites were saying, 'Hey, okay. We'll give this to you but take your time. Don't move too fast.'"

"But if you took the Negro race ten or 15 years ago as a hypothetical 'nation' within the United States, we would have been the second richest nation on the face of the earth. Based on the amount of property, number of banks, businesses and schools owned and operated by Negroes, we were second only to the U.S. as a whole. So in just three generations — since 1865 — see what we had accomplished in spite of the repressive segregation laws!"

I ask Charles if he ever feels alienated from other blacks because of his political beliefs and associations. "Yes," he says slowly, "Yes, sometimes I do. I've taken a stand that's unpopular with most Negroes — not wrong, just unpopular."

"You know," muses Charles, "in the Birch chapter I belong to, there's only one Negro — me. But," he hesitates, "my beliefs about limited government — its role in our lives and what government should and shouldn't be — put me in a minority, too. So within the Society — because of my beliefs — I'm among friends."

Generation upon generation of adults have looked with dismay at their offspring and cried, "What's the matter with young people today?" It's usually in reaction to youth's movement away from the established values and mores of their elders into areas hitherto unexplored. Birchers are no exception. They, too, look with concern at the up-and-coming generation, but they don't ask "What's wrong?" In their minds, they know what's wrong.

"Why is it," challenges a silver-haired, retired school teacher, "that the richest country on earth has an education system that's in shambles? Why is it that we've produced an entire generation that's almost illiterate?"

"I'll tell you," she states flatly. "I was a teacher for over 30 years, and I've seen a lot. There is a movement underfoot — I don't know where it is or who it is — but its aim is to deliberately reduce the quality of education in America. Its design is to turn out students who can't read or reason or even think. The result is a mass of people who'll buy any bill of goods you care to sell 'em."

Amanda Jordan, 19, a graduate of Lovett High School, has just completed her freshman year at Hillsdale College in

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Hilldale, Michigan. A pretty girl with bouncy blonde hair, innocent blue eyes and a sweet, sensitive smile, Amanda was a cheerleader at Lovett, belonged to the French Club and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes as well as holding down a part-time job. In addition to all that, she has been a member of the John Birch Society since she was 13.

"I became involved so young," she says, "because of the way I grew up. My parents have been Birchers for as long as I can remember. I've got three sisters and two brothers, and they've all been Birchers, too. I went to a Birch Youth Camp in Tennessee for the first time when I was 12, and I've been every summer since then, except for last year."

"I wanted to go to camp," explains Amanda, "and that decision was mine. I guess my parents sort of expected me to become a member of the Society, but they didn't pressure me. If I hadn't wanted to, they wouldn't have made me."

The Youth Camps began about nine years ago as part of a plan to involve the children (ages 14-18) of Birchers in their beliefs and values. At present, there are ten camps scattered across the United States. They offer a one-week program combining traditional camping activities with lectures on history, political science, economics and social issues.

The Birch Society is categorically opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment. They are certain the re-evaluation and shifting of traditional male-female roles (resulting from the national divorce epidemic and women's mass entry into the work-for-pay world) and increased sexual openness have been masterminded by the "Insiders" in order to destroy the patriarchal family structure as the fundamental building block of American society.

"I like to see women who like to do stuff and work outside the home," explains Amanda, as she strokes the purring, green-eyed cat in her lap, "as long as they're capable and have the same or better qualifications as the man who wants to work. But I'm not for any 50-50 deal where you have to have so many women, so many blacks. I think the better person should get the job. But I do think," she says, "that people have the right to say, 'I'm sorry, I don't want you because you're a woman,' or 'I'm sorry, I don't want you because you're a man.' I'm all for people being equal, but there are enough laws already on the books. I don't think we need ERA."

"I'm pretty typical," says Amanda when asked to describe the others in her Youth Chapter. "I think pre-marital sex is wrong. I think drugs are bad, but . . ." She hesitates. "I'd say we're divided about evenly — some do, some don't. They're just individual people. You can't stereotype them."

Amanda is thoughtful, serious, as she

considers her words. "I would like people to think I'm a lady, which means that I would always act in a Christian manner. I don't want to lower my standards or change anything I believe just to follow a group." She smiles a little, as if aware of how old-fashioned and "un-hip" her words sound. "I want, I guess, to be a nice girl."

It is generally conceded today's government bears little resemblance to the fledgling of 1787. It has become an unwieldy, inefficient, multi-tentacled bureaucracy, reaching more and more into the personal lives of its citizens, citizens who — in large part — have aided and abetted its gargantuan expansion through apathy and abdication of personal responsibility. When viewed in a global context, our political and economic allies and enemies around the world don't appear to be in much better shape. Economic instability, social unrest, mounting ecological crises and the continuing proliferation of nuclear arms make the earth an unsafe place for anyone to live.

But where else is there to go?

For Birchers, the answer lies in a return to the 'good ole days' of *laissez-faire* capitalism, fierce nationalism, rugged individualism and 'that old time religion,' a return, perhaps, to an imaginary existence. Not within the lifetime of any Bircher have solutions for the world's problems been quite that simple. In the 200 years since this country's inception, the human race has gone through relative areas of change, leaving us within arm's reach of global annihilation. Can the answer to the seemingly insurmountable problems confronting us lie in returning to a nationalistic and militaristic posture?

Birch critics would argue the challenge facing us is that of transcending the limiting boundaries of traditional belief and forging — as did those courageous gentlemen of old — a new order. Sound like an exhortation from the *Illuminati*? It has been written that Thomas Jefferson, author of our Declaration of Independence, was one of the first initiates into this trans-national society which had as its goal a unified world. Other key names of that era linked with the *Illuminati* are those of Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, both high figures in the hierarchy of American Saints.

But to Birchers, the concept of a one-world state is anathema, carrying connotations of barbed wire, goose-stepping peace-keepers and a freedomless existence. And given the over-all state of human affairs — if it is, in fact, the insecure, power-hungry, irresponsible phenomenon it appears to be — their hunger for a return to the attitudes of the "good ole days" may be, if not realistic or practicable, at least understandable.



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